THE

PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL PULPIT.

SERMON BY THE REV. T. S. W. MOTT.

VOL. IV.] MARCH, 1834. [NO. III.

UTILITY OF PERSEVERING PRAYER CONSIDERED:

A Sermon,

BY THE REV. T. S. W. MOTT,

MISSIONARY AT LENOIR COUNTY AND PARTS ADJACENT, N. C.

1 Thes. v. 17.—"*Pray without ceasing.*"

WHATEVER views we may be led, by these words, to entertain of the exact extent to which we are bound to carry our devotion, they can at least leave no doubt upon our minds as to the importance of prayer in general. Language so strong must mean something. Prayer is the great appointed channel of divine communication to man. To every one who understands the connexion between a devout and a holy life, or who casts an eye of faith upon the pages of the New Testament, its necessity, both as a source of spiritual life, and an act of commanded duty, will readily appear. It is through this principally that the Christian has any reason to expect the aid of the Holy Spirit, or any other of those good and perfect gifts which come alike from the Father of lights; but only come in connexion with our embracing and acting upon the promise, "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find." GOD, who alone is perfectly acquainted with all the wants and necessities of man, has likewise, in his holy word, commanded us to pray. He has enforced the duty with a clearness and decision which must satisfy us it can be neglected only at the peril of the soul. How forcible also on this subject are the example and the precepts of our blessed Saviour. He who said, that "men ought always to pray, and not to faint;" who has taught us the value of prayer by the very encouragement he held out to the

practice of it, embraced himself every opportunity of holding communion with heaven. He went up, says the Apostle, "into a mountain to pray;"—"he went out and continued all night in prayer" to GOD.

It would appear, therefore, that prayer is at once the privilege and the duty of a Christian. By every consideration he is obligated to pray. It is his *only* unfailing means of growth in grace. It is in *this* way alone he can send forth those grateful acknowledgments of mercies received, without which the heart would be oppressed with its confined emotions. It is a service which reason and religion alike teach him he owes to GOD and his own soul; and when in connexion with this, we consider the entire dependence of man upon his Maker for every temporal blessing, it cannot surprise us, that one whose mind was so thoroughly instructed in divine things as that of the apostle, should have made use of the strong language before us, "Pray without ceasing." Undoubtedly, however, the will has its limitations. It will be my object, therefore, in the following discourse,—

I. TO EXPLAIN THE LANGUAGE;

II. TO ENFORCE THE DUTY IT MAY BE FOUND TO INCULCATE; and

III. TO GIVE SOME BRIEF DIRECTIONS FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF IT.

I. I am to explain this language,—"Pray without ceasing." What does it mean? Not surely that we are *always* to continue in the act of prayer. That were impossible. It would render us liable to those vain repetitions condemned by our Saviour. It would expose us to weariness of body and mind; and result, it is to be feared, but too often in impious, because useless and unmeaning petitions.

Besides, such a course would be inconsistent with duty,—mercy before sacrifice. To be continually engaged in prayer would necessarily lead to the abandonment of every other concern of life; every duty to GOD, to the world, and ourselves. There is on this subject a prevailing error. Many suppose,

that unless they are uninterruptedly engaged in devotion, they do not serve their Maker. This is a great and dangerous mistake. We serve God always when we act from conscience and principle;—we serve him even when we serve ourselves with right motives;—we serve him in our labor, our recreation, our rest. One principle, in the heart of a good man, sanctifies the every action of his life, viz. a constant reference in *all* that he does to his Maker's will.

It could not have been the intention of St. Paul, therefore, that we should never cease praying in the literal sense of the terms. They may be taken in a broader acceptation. There are those who depart from the widest latitude of their meaning; there is an unsoundness in the religion of some professing Christians, which admits of trifling with the most sacred obligations; there are those who not only cease to pray without intermission, but who go so far as to omit the duty of prayer for seasons together, or even finally abandon it. To either of these the language of our text is strongly opposed.

"Pray without ceasing,"—we may at least safely regard it as an exhortation to regularity and perseverance. Appoint your regular hours of religious exercise, and never neglect them; much less, never finally and entirely relinquish the practice. You would not, for days or weeks in succession, refuse sustenance necessary to the support of animal life; with what propriety, then, can you reject the nutriment of the soul? "What is the chaff to the wheat, saith the Lord." Our right to trifle with the body is certainly greater than our right to trifle with the immortal and better part. If we are not justified in exposing the visible man to a destruction that is merely temporal, surely we are making a wider departure from the will of God, when we deliberately jeopardize our never-dying spirits, with which all our *real*, because our *eternal* interests stand connected. How then is it possible we should ever cease to pray in the sense of a partial, temporary, or final abandonment of the practice? Never in *either* of these senses can man safely do it. So long as, either in a temporal or spiritual point of view, he continues a dependent creature; so long as there exists a God, able and willing to supply his wants, but without

whose aid he can do nothing and receive nothing; so long will prayer, the great appointed channel of divine communication, continue to be necessary to him. As that period in the life of any individual when he could forego it in consistency with his own best interests never yet has arrived, so it never will, till he becomes independent of GOD, and the weakness, the misery, and the guilt of his nature and condition have at once passed away; when he has no longer a sin to confess, or a pardon to implore; when no want remains unsupplied, and he has no blessing to crave, either for the body or the soul; when temptation assails him in vain; when he has nothing to acknowledge and nothing to dread, but the weakness which now affects him; nothing shall rise in the omnipotence of the ALMIGHTY to compass the desires of the heart. Till such a time as this, and such a state of things as this obtains in his history, there is not a moment in the life of any human being when prayer is not vitally important to him,—when it is not his dependence,—his all.

There is reason to believe, however, the apostle had something further in view than regularity and perseverance in the observation of this duty. In addition to this, he probably meant to enforce the necessity of cultivating a devout and prayerful spirit. It is not enough, my brethren, that we once a week assemble in this house, to make our confessions, and put up our petitions to Heaven. It is not enough that we do this frequently; that we retire occasionally from the world and pray to GOD; that we do it daily in the solitude of our own chambers: for all this we may do without maintaining that ceaseless, untiring spirit of devotion enjoined by the text. Something more is necessary to enable us to withstand the temptations which daily and hourly assail us,—to preserve that holy, peaceful frame of mind, which is at once a privilege, a duty, and, as Christians, the great source of our enjoyment. The Christian should "watch unto prayer." Like JESUS, his disciple should be devout. Like Enoch, he ought to "walk with GOD." Like David, he should wait upon the LORD in the silent, wrapt, and patient homage of the soul, "*Wait thou upon the* LORD;" *wait patiently upon the* LORD.

Now there is no need of retiring in all these cases, and placing yourself in the attitude of prayer. The time has come when neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem shall men worship the Father; but the true worshippers shall "worship him in spirit and in truth." All you have to do is "to lay a mandate on your thinking faculty, and send it heaven-ward to GOD." Prayer, properly understood, is no labored, artificial performance. It consists neither in the position of the body, nor the expression of the lips. It requires particularity neither of time nor of place. It is simply made up of the concentrated faculties and affections of the soul, directed to a particular object sought of GOD.

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unutter'd or express'd;
The motion of a hidden fire,
That kindles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear;
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but GOD is near."

If, as this beautiful hymn goes on to express, it is the "*sublimest* strains that reach the Majesty on high," so it is the "simplest form of speech" the infant tongue can lisp. Lift up your heart, therefore, in silent supplication to your Maker. He can read your thoughts, be they never so secret; and believe me, the softest whisper, when directed in faith to him, will not escape his notice, or lose its reward. A thousand opportunities of expressing the feelings and desires of your mind occur daily. You may always find time for some devout ejaculation. In the intervals of business or labor, some aspiration may ascend after that *better* state, where toil ceases, where are pleasures at the right hand of GOD for evermore, and man no longer eats his bread in the sweat of his brow. In the silent watches of the night you may sigh for that rest laid up for the people of GOD. Do you eat? pray that it may strengthen you to pursue the course of duty; when you have satisfied the demands of nature, return to the Giver of all good the thankful homage of your heart. Do you journey? commit yourself to the care of the Almighty arm. Do you rejoice?

there is gratitude due to God for the happiness you experience. Do you weep? look for consolation to him, whose office it is to "bind up the broken-hearted," and "to comfort those who mourn." By thus turning every incident of life into an occasion of prayer, you will in time acquire a habit of devotion. It will no longer be a task to you, but a pleasure. Your affections will be constantly ascending to Heaven.

Now this is what the apostle means by praying *always*. He would not that we carry this duty so far as to have it interfere with others; of this there is no need; nor is it what St. Paul means, than whom there never was a more consistent character; but that men acquire, and maintain a devout spirit — a holy seriousness — a habit of prayer — a habit of looking to the Lord, not only at those times which nature and the custom of the pious seem to mark out as the stated seasons of devotion, but at *all* times; in all their spiritual conflicts, in all their worldly difficulties and undertakings; whenever, in a word, their circumstances require aid extrinsic of themselves, and which aid they have rational hopes of obtaining from above.

II. Having thus explained the text, my second object will be to set before your minds the motives to the cultivation of this spirit.

In the first place suffer me, brethren, to remind you that great devotion is the will and command of God. It is not so much from the Scriptures enforcing the duty of prayer in express terms, that we so regard it, though they have done this often enough, as from the vast variety of ways, both direct and incidental, in which the sacred writers have inculcated the lesson. To glance at these briefly but generally, how frequent is the injunction of our blessed Saviour to pray — to watch and pray. How earnest and reiterated the exhortations of the apostles, to be "*instant in prayer*" — to "pray without ceasing" — to "pray always, every where and for all things, lifting up holy hands unto God." How many beautiful examples of piety and devotion are set before us for imitation in the Old and New Testaments: Daniel, Solomon, David, Christ, the apostles and primitive followers of our Lord! In how many parables has our Saviour set before us at once the obligations

and encouragements to prayer! And what good is there — what blessing within the compass of human wants, or wishes, which he has not promised in answer to it? It is needless to quote authority familiar to every mind acquainted with the Scriptures.

But again; it is by the cultivation of a prayerful spirit alone that we can reasonably expect to make any progress in religion; at least, we shall certainly do nothing *without* it. There are two great means of grace placed in our hands, and in the neglect of which we shall use all others in vain. These are the *Scriptures* and *prayer*. Separate them, and they both become useless. "The things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned." The Bible is, therefore, a book beyond the unassisted powers of the natural man. It is the work of inspiration — the production of the HOLY GHOST. Of course none but the being that dictated its truths, can reveal and apply them to the human mind and conscience. But how are you to expect the aid of that Divine instructer? only as you seek it of GOD; only as you pray for it. He "gives his Holy Spirit to those who ask him;" and though we sometimes meet with instances of a conversion, almost as miraculous as a resurrection from the dead, yet it is ordinarily to those *only* who do ask, that the spirit is given. Prayer then is essential to your first step in the way of salvation; how much more to your progress! There is no stopping in the road we travel. The moment you make a pause, that moment you begin to recede. When you *cease* praying you must pause, you can advance no further than the Scriptures direct; they can direct no further than the Spirit enables you to comprehend their meaning; and the Spirit will reveal that meaning no further than you pray for his assistance. Thus it is evident the spirit of prayer must be preserved, or the sources of knowledge will fail, and when your spiritual sustenance is taken away, you will hunger and die.

There is *another*, and I think a still more *striking* point of view, in which the necessity of maintaining a devout spirit appears.

It is no unusual thing to hear Christians complaining of the

formality of their devotions. Their thoughts wander — their hearts are cold. The reason of this is obvious. They pray very little, and that in a very imperfect manner. They have fallen into a habit of addressing their Maker without realizing the solemn nature of the act. They have thus neglected prayer, till the objects of it have lost all power over their feelings, or have trifled with it till they have prayed themselves into a state of spiritual death. If they have prayed at all, every petition has brought a new shade of darkness on the mind, and a new degree of lethargy on the heart. Each return to the duty has removed them another step from God, in whose sight they have appeared to be adding but sin to sin. What sin indeed so offensive — so fit to provoke the divine displeasure — so apt to result in injury to the offender's soul—as the solemn mockery of a careless, indevout, and corrupted heart! Deplorable condition indeed, when our very *attempts* to advance become the occasion of decline!

Now the case of him who has acquired a devout spirit is exactly the reverse of all this. Such a one never prays but with effect. Every petition put up, as it has been, in sincerity and faith, has been followed by a blessing. Divine light has gradually broken in upon the mind. New wants have been discovered. New desires have arisen; old ones have been strengthened. Conscience has become more sensitive; the heart more tender; the affections more pure. God has blessed to him the means of grace and salvation. Such a man never allows himself to pray unless he is in earnest, or he will not cease praying till he has become so. Does he feel an indisposition to the duty? he will make it a cause of humiliation before God; he will meditate upon his condition as a sinner — upon his wants, his sins, his wretchedness, the mercies he has received, till *melted* with contrition, or warmed with love, the case is reversed, and he finds it more difficult to restrain than to pour forth his devotions. He uses no "vain babbling;" is never "hasty with his heart, to utter things before God." Every prayer has its object. Every object is a matter of previous meditation and inquiry as to its lawfulness and utility. In *this* way devotion in time becomes a habit — a

pleasing delightful employment. In effect, such a one prays "without ceasing." He is always on the wing. Prayer is his *life*, his *breath*, his *being;* and *without* it he could not live.

It is likewise highly worthy of remark that a devout spirit is the *only* source from which as praying Christians we can expect to derive any real happiness. Prayer is to most people a burden. It is a cross, and so heavy is it, that the man of the world will not take it up, though he must lose his soul. The professing Christian, however, knows if he has any just views of his obligations, that he must bear this cross; and how many are there who appear ready to sink under its weight. How many are there, who go through a round of mere useless forms in private, written or extemporary, without benefit, — it may be in absolute pain. They find they make no progress in sanctification. Their negligence leaves them the sport of every temptation. They cannot withstand the force of one evil passion or propensity. They have thrown aside the only means of defence. They are for ever sinning, and repenting, and yielding again to their corruptions. Thus they have no reliance upon GOD; and are without hope of ever escaping the corruptions that are in the world through lust. In a word, they are without one fruit of the Spirit. They have no peace of conscience — no comfort — no joy in the HOLY GHOST.

But a spirit of prayer removes *all these difficulties* from the mind of its possessor. Devotion to him is no longer painful; it is a privilege. Such a man is truly happy. What can disturb the serenity of his mind? What can alarm his fears, or shake his confidence in GOD? What can deprive him of the protection of that Almighty Being, to whose care he constantly commits himself? What can separate him from the love of CHRIST? He lays down at night, and his thoughts are sweet, for his meditations are of GOD and his law,—of the Saviour who redeemed him, in whom is his trust. He rises in the morning, rejoicing in his Maker's goodness, and pursues the journey of the day, walking in the comfort of the HOLY GHOST, and in the path of obedience and righteousness. The temptations which overpower others assail him without effect, for he is clad in the whole armor of GOD,—the helmet of salvation,—

the breast-plate of faith. His hope of final victory is steadfast, and thus he is at once fulfilling the commands of God, growing in holiness and living in peace.

In view of these inducements to the cultivation of such a spirit, it becomes us individually to inquire, whether we are possessed of it; for surely they are of weight, and demand our serious attention. What is the state of your minds? Are you in the exercise of this spirit? Have you acquired a habit of devotion? Do your thoughts naturally and easily ascend in devout fervency to God? Is communion with Him your chief employment and your *dear* delight? Do you look to Him for all temporal and spiritual good? Do you seek in all things his direction? What answer do your consciences make to these inquiries? Do they tell you *this* is *not* the state of your souls? Alas, then they tell you you are in a state of great wretchedness! They tell you you are not candidates for a happy immortality. They tell you you have very little religious principle, and that you are daily growing more formal, more lifeless, more cold in your devotion, more liable to be overcome by every temptation, or to fall into the grossest sins. And where will this end? Most probably in an evil heart of unbelief; for depend upon it the purity and the vigor of your faith depends upon the cultivation of your religious affections, and your affections reciprocally upon your *faith*. How many, by departing from the living God, have nurtured an "evil heart of unbelief;" have cherished it, till it has acquired a power that has expelled every holy principle from the mind and feeling from the breast. How many, by laying aside a good conscience, have "made shipwreck of faith!" When will you cease to trifle with God and yourselves! Will you do it to-morrow? Alas, no! delay it another day, and the greater probability you will delay it for ever; for to-morrow will be as this day, with the exception, the unhappy exception only, that your aversion to the necessary self-denial will have increased.

III. I proceed, therefore, in the third place to some brief directions by way of assisting you in acquiring a devout and prayerful spirit.

In the first place, then, never neglect the stated seasons of devotion,—at morning, at noon, and at night, make your confessions and your supplications to GOD. You can have no sufficient excuse for neglecting this duty. Is there much to occupy your time? leave your bed the earlier, and return to it the later. Steal an hour from sleep,—from listlessness,—from noise,—from unnecessary intercourse with the world. Be much in secret prayer,—retire within yourself. The devotions of the family circle are not sufficient for you, if you engage in them, and for the plain reason, that you have sins to confess which are known only to yourself and the ALMIGHTY; and you have desires and wants, which no one but yourself can *feel* and *express*. It is impossible, therefore, that any one should conduct the devotions of a family in a manner which would be altogether adapted to *your* circumstances.

Again; be studious always to perform your devotions in a *careful, conscientious* manner. Make conscience of prayer as the command of GOD; and never engage in it without *deep* impressions of its *sacredness*, its solemnity, and the danger you incur of making a vain, if not an unhallowed oblation. Let your thoughts, therefore, be collected,—your attention fixed. Let the heart be deeply sensible of your helplessness and guilt. Then will your prayer ascend like incense to the throne of grace, and find acceptance with the LORD of Hosts.

Finally, brethren, be much in the habit of ejaculatory prayer. In *this* you can engage at *any* moment of the day, and nothing will have a more decided and happy effect. If you are in company, you need not open your lips,—"*Prayer is the soul's sincere desire.*" The slightest emotion of the heart is not hid from Him who seeth in secret. If you are alone, you can speak aloud; the sound of your voice may enliven your devotion. In this way you will soon fall into that established habit which is a second nature. Every new return to the duty will be a pleasure. You will look forward with joyful anticipation to the consecrated hour which is to separate you from a sinful world, and place you in communion with heaven. Till you do acquire something of *this* spirit, you know neither the pleasure nor the value of religion. Your present life is either one of

pain, or you are in a state of *spiritual death.* Your religion neither gives you comfort, nor keeps you from those repeated acts of transgression which expose you to the displeasure of God.

And here, having finished the proposed discussion of the subject, I should pause, were I not sensible how common a thing it is with the great body of mankind to neglect prayer altogether; and did I not hope that the discharge of my duty in reminding you of the deep sinfulness of such a course, may be followed by the blessing of God. Are you then one who never prays? who live as if there were no God,—no accountability,—no hereafter,—no heaven to gain,—no hell from which to fly? Is this wisdom? Is it the return which a recollection of the many and great mercies you have received teaches you you owe to your Maker and Preserver? Is it what reason teaches you you owe to yourself? Alas! thoughtless man, why will you sport with your own best interests? Acknowledging the truth,—the *divine* authority of the religion in which you have been educated,—you allow its most solemn doctrines, precepts, threats, and promises to make no impression on your mind. Suffer me to warn you, that you are living in a course of sin,—of sin, which in the very nature of things must sink the soul! For neglecting this duty of prayer, you violate a more *positive* command, at the same time that you permit every other sin to grow upon you,—every evil passion and propensity to acquire new ascendency in the soul. O! be entreated; be persuaded, as you honor God, as you value your everlasting peace; as you would spare some minister of Jesus Christ the pain of visiting your *hopeless, impenitent* death-bed; as you would save yourself the horror of approaching an undone eternity, be entreated to seek the grace of God; to submit without delay to the obedience of Christ. Go, sinner! go, in God's name, to the Saviour. Fall down at his feet,—submit to his righteousness,—receive his cross,—for *thus*, and *thus* only, can you find rest to your soul.—Amen.